



Why looking after mental health during coronavirus is important and how to do it

What are the added risks around mental health during the coronavirus outbreak?

Survival mode – our mode of living has shifted from enjoying and experiencing various things in life to focusing on the necessities and living in a survival mode.

Fear – there are a number of things we are fearful about at present, our health, our lives, ourselves, our loved ones.

Changes in sleep and eating – with the move to working from home and then lockdown, it is easy for changes in sleep and eating to be happening. Also, if we are stressed and anxious about coronavirus or just bored of being at home, there can be effects on our sleep and eating. Changes to these, however, can impact our mental health.

Health anxiety – it may not just be coronavirus that is making us anxious at the moment. The focus on health can make people concerned about their health more generally. If you have an underlying health condition, you may be concerned about that; if you have a loved one with an underlying health condition, this may be an added concern now; or it may be that we just wish we were fitter and healthier in case of getting coronavirus so that we can fight it off more easily.

Feeling of hopelessness and despair – nobody has the answers to coronavirus at the moment so we can be left feeling hopeless, particularly if we focus too much on certain aspects of reports about the pandemic. Despair is another issue at this time, particularly if we know people who have been diagnosed with coronavirus or those who have died.

Loss of control – the most obvious sign of this is lockdown, closely followed by not having control over coronavirus itself. When things feel out of our control and we don't seem to be able to get this feeling of control back, we can easily become stressed and anxious or very down and depressed.

Safety and security – there is a feeling of not being safe from coronavirus but during the pandemic many people are losing their safety and security in other ways, such as through job losses and financial uncertainty.

Less social contact – Loneliness is another significant issue. Whilst we understand the need for social distancing, it does put us at a distance from others and can make us feel isolated and lonely emotionally as well as physically.

Information overload – there is a lot of information about coronavirus at present and this in itself can be draining, particularly if the focus is anxiety provoking and we spend a lot of time looking at this.

Coping mechanisms that don't help – lots of people are now stuck at home and naturally trying to manage the monotony of this. This means watching lots of TV or playing video games or spending extended periods of time on social media. This can be associated with changes in eating and sleeping patterns, changes in alcohol consumption and caffeine consumption. There may be more sitting around and less exercising.

What are the mental health issues in COVID-19?

Anxiety - this is the body's natural response to threat or danger and as coronavirus is something which currently threatens us, anxiety is a natural response.

Depression – as mentioned above, there are a number of risks associated with COVID-19 that could cause us to feel very down or depressed. For example, feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, despair, lack of safety and security.

Any mental health condition – the truth is that any mental health condition could be triggered by this pandemic and we will know more about which were triggered most after the fact. If we have had a previous mental health issue, there is often a higher chance of this happening again if there are significant triggers so this may occur now with the added pressures.

How to look after your mental health during COVID-19

Set up a routine – Sounds simple but it is helpful for your mental health to have some routine and to continue to do things despite being at home.

- Get up – it's easy to slip into getting up later but if you change your sleep routine, there is likely to be a knock on effect and if you are not so busy in the day, you may struggle to sleep at night, setting up a vicious cycle which is then difficult to break.
- Get dressed – it can be tempting to stay in pyjamas all day if you are not leaving the house but getting dressed gets you moving a little, can make you feel ready for the day and signals to your brain that this is an active part of the day rather than a time when you want to relax to sleep.
- Eat – sometimes people forget to eat if they are at home all day and sometimes people eat more if they are home all day. Either of these is a change for your body and your brain and can cause difficulties. If you are working from home, it can be easy to forget to eat if you are caught up in work activities or are feeling like you have to prove you are working because it's remote but your brain needs food to function, you won't be at your best if you don't eat a healthy diet.
- Drink water – again this can easily be missed at home but your body and brain need water to function properly.
- Do some exercise – the risk for mental health with not exercising is that we don't get the release of endorphins (the hormones that make us happy) if we don't exercise so there is an obvious potential effect on mental health here
- Keep taking prescription medication – lack of routine can make us forget about important things like taking prescription medication with obvious potential negative effects so routine is important to manage this.
- Monitor alcohol and caffeine consumption – too much of either of these can have negative effects on mental health
- Clean your home – there are studies showing that the space we live in has an impact on how we feel. Also cleaning the house allows some exercise which is protective for mental health.

Set limits

- Media – we may be encouraged by some things to use this time to binge watch our favourite box sets or watch films we've missed out on but sitting watching TV for long periods of time without moving around is not good for mental health so setting time limits can be helpful.
- Social media – we are observing social distancing from each other so social media can provide a way of keeping in touch socially and this is important. Like watching TV, though, too much sitting looking at social media is not good for our mental health either so it may be helpful to set limits.

Focus on what you can control

- Set up a to do list and tick off each thing you achieve – there may be lots of things that feel out of control at present but if we focus on the things we can control, we can regain a sense of control. By setting up a 'to do' list and ticking things off, we can feel a sense of achievement and the ticks on the list can feel rewarding thereby building our self esteem and boosting mental wellbeing.

Remember

- You can opt out of conversations you find overwhelming – you don't have to listen to everyone's views on coronavirus or anything else if you are finding it too much. You can politely opt out to protect your mental health if you are feeling overwhelmed.
- Be kind – people are frightened and when people are frightened, they don't always react in the ways they would at other times. People may present as having fixed views or skewed perspectives due to their own fears about what is happening. If you get caught up in this, there can be a negative impact on your mental health.

Sources of information

- Look at official sources – there is a lot of information out there but given the population level anxiety at the moment, a lot of the information is written from a perspective of fear and if we focus on this, we can begin to struggle with our own mental health.
- Try not to make assumptions – given that nobody has all of the answers about coronavirus at the moment, our natural reaction to try to have some sense of control can be to make assumptions. It is difficult not to do this as it can be a coping mechanism to help us try to manage what can feel like a very anxiety-provoking situation. Making assumptions, however, can add to our anxieties and negatively impact our mental health. Also, it can be difficult later if we are wrong in our assumptions, to then try to resolve this in our own minds.
- Set times – one way to manage the overwhelming amount of information about coronavirus is to set a time in the day when you will catch up on the latest news and public health advice from official sources. This means that if you are finding it anxiety provoking or overwhelming, you can limit this to a particular time of day and use your strategies to manage your anxiety around this. If you are struggling with anxiety, see our guides to managing this during COVID-19.

Sources of support

- Stay connected to your sources of support – although we are all engaged in social distancing, it is helpful to stay connected to your sources of support at this time. This can be helpful for practical as well as emotional reasons now.
- Charities and helplines – Many charities and helplines are available to support you at this time and some have added specific resources or capacity at this time due to the acknowledgement of added pressure on people during the pandemic. If you are worried about yourself or someone else, please use any and all sources of support.

Avoid burnout – it can be easy to try to use this time to do lots of things we may not have gotten around to. If people are working from home, they can try to work almost constantly to catch up on things or even keep up with things during this difficult time. If people are studying, this can be a similar issue. If people are home schooling children, they can be engaged in this all day and then planning the next day all night. It is easy to burnout if we continuously push ourselves to do things at this time so although it is good for mental health to be active, it is important to also have breaks and rest periods as well.

If you are worried about your mental health or that of others, please seek help. [We are happy to support you](#) or you can speak with other organisations. Many have added services at this time due to acknowledging the added pressures for people during this pandemic.

We wish you a safe and healthy path through this pandemic.